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ABSTRACT

A study examined the curricular event in Swedish preschools known as "circle time," a daily event in most schools during which children, teachers, and sometimes parents gather in a circle for 20-30 minutes and share songs, discussion, music, storytelling, and group play. A special theme, such as the environment or a holiday, may also be dealt with during circle time. The practice began in Swedish kindergartens as early as the 1880s and has spread to preschools throughout the country. Through survey questionnaires, ethnographic observations, and interviews at 5 day care centers, the study sought to determine what actually happens during circle time and what the implications are for the participants. The results indicate that the activity is both a ritual, providing security for participants, and a meeting. To the staff, circle time corresponds to a need for structuring activities and indicating obvious changes during the day. To the children, circles are an asset entailing affirmatory meetings, but also a restraint in which discipline and coercion are prevalent. Contains 16 references. (MDM)

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CIRCLE TIME IN PRE-SCHOOL

Lena Rubinstein Reich

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CIRCLE TIME IN PRE-SCHOOL

Lena Rubinstein Reich

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The present report is a summary of a Swedish thesis that focuses on the curricular event of the Swedish pre-school programme called *circle time*. The main question addressed in the study is: *What actually happens during circle time, and what are the implications for the participants?* The study can be defined as a process-analytic study of the social and educational content of circle time, where an attempt is made to integrate structural, group and individual perspectives. The main empirical data contains observations through video-taping of circle time in five groups in different day-care centres and socalled stimulated-recall interviews with staff and children.

The results indicate that circle time is both a ritual and a meeting. The person conducting circle time is facing a number of dilemmas which are resolved by resorting to different strategies.

Keywords: Circle time, early childhood education, group activities, pre-school, social interaction, teacher role.

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The background and purpose of the study

This study focuses on the curricular event of the pre-school programme called *circle time*. In Sweden the pre-school institution caters for children aged 1 - 7. "Pre-school" is the general term, denoting day-care centres and part-time groups.

The thesis consists of four parts structured according to the following outline:

Part I	*Problem inventory* Two pilot studies: one questionnaire and one quasi-ethnographic study conducted in a part-time pre-school group Review of earlier research Specification of problems to be studied and theoretical framework
Part II	*Circle time from a historical perspective*
Part III	*Methods* Methodology and data
Part IV	*Empirical study of circle time in five different groups*

The two pilot studies and the review of earlier research show that the activity referred to in this study as "circle time" appears to be a daily event in pre-schools with similar contents, methods and structure, regardless of age-span, culture and educational policy. Teachers, sometimes parents, and children gather together, often in a circular configuration, conducting joint activities for about 20-30 minutes. Song, talk, music, movement, group-play, storytelling, doing the calendar, seeing who is absent, talking about the weather and providing information are common sub-events of circle time. A special theme can also be dealt with, often related to subjects such as the environment, flora, fauna, the seasons or annual feasts. (Hedenqvist, 1987; Kantor, 1989; McAfee, 1985; Sundell, 1988;

Sønstabo, 1978; Walch, 1987.)

Interaction in circle time adheres to a structure similar to that of classroom interaction. The teacher dominates the interaction and frequently asks the children leading questions. She/he has the right to change the subject and also to interrupt a child´s "turn" and take the floor. Previous research showed that circle time was characterized by constraints, adult domination and routine to a greater extent than teachers thought. Some sub-events in circle time - "doing the calendar", for example - seemed over-estimated from a learning perspective.

The following main research questions were put forward in the present study:

What actually happens during circle time, and what are the implications for participants?

Why is there a typical form and content pertaining to circle time?

What purpose does circle time serve with regard to teachers/staff?

What purpose does circle time serve from the point of view of the participating children?

How is circle time conducted? How does the teacher think and act in circle time?

Circle time from a historical perspective

In order to answer the questions of why circle time exists in the first place, what its typical content and structure are like and what purpose it actually fulfils, it was studied from a historical perspective.

Two levels had to be taken into account. One was predominantly "rhetorical" in character, comprising such materials as official guidelines and text-books where the prevailing ideology and ideas would be put forward. The other was a practical level, concerned with the way in which circle time was designed in actual practice. Data were drawn from official documents, from textbooks used in kindergarten teacher training and

from interviews with informants, methods teachers at teacher training colleges.

Official guidelines regarding pre-schools issued from 1938 to 1987 have been analysed with reference to their views on circle time. On this level, recommendations and rationales for circle time have changed over time along with modifications in the economic, social and cultural structure of society .

In practice, however, circle time has existed as a curricular event in the daily programme over the years. This daily programme, comprising circle time and activity referred to as "free play" as curricular events, is described in virtually identical terms, regardless of time and type of pre-school (see e g Moberg, 1945; Svenning & Svenning, 1979).

The content and form of circle time in pre-schools originate from the Froebelian kindergarten pedagogy. It emerges as a curricular event in the 1880s. Within the framework of Froebel´s natural-romantic approach, finding oneself in a circular configuration had a profound symbolic significance. It was a symbol of infinity and communion with God. The disciples of Froebel, however, simplified his ideas to make them fit structural frame factors, and disregarding the deep symbolic meaning Froebel infused into his pedagogy.

In the historical analysis some contradictions are apparent, and they can be assumed to have had an impact on the implementation of circle time. The development of the Swedish pre-school has been heavily influenced by the Froebel tradition (Tallberg-Broman, 1991). In Sweden this tradition was developed within a feministic culture embodying a holistic view according to which a child should develop in a homelike atmosphere as well as a tradition which prescribed that work should be individualized, which meant paying regard to and start out from the individual child. In addition to its presence in Froebelian pedagogy, this view is prevalent in the predominant developmental psychological perspective of the 1940s - 70s and in the socalled "dialogue pedagogy" of the 1970s. On the other hand, it is a fact that in a pre-school one has to deal with a group

of children, which makes it impossible to individualize exclusively. The teacher will have to balance individual needs against those of the group especially during circle time. In addition, the aim set up for the child in a pre-school also includes taking part in a fellowship (community) and being part of a group.

Another contradictory element is the classical pedagogical problem of trying to reconcile the teacher's task to "conduct" with the child's freedom to develop on her/his own. This contradiction can be found both in the Froebel tradition and in the socalled reform pedagogy. Circle time is an occasion when the pre-school teacher is very clearly conducting, but it is also a situation where the influence exercised by democratic education of the child is brought to the fore.

A third factor that emerged in the historical review of official documents is the question of the relationship between *care* and *education*. As early as in the Population Commission Report of 1938, both care and education were emphasized; but at the same time, the boundaries between the tasks of the crèche (day-care) and of the kindergarten were clearly marked. These boundaries are slowly being erased. In the so called Commission on Nursery Provision (SOU, 1972:26), these structural differences between day-care centres and part-time groups are entirely disregarded. In practice, we are witnessing the establishment of the view that education and care can be joined together without difficulty.

Method

The present study can be defined as a process-analytic study of the social and educational content of circle time, where an attempt is made to integrate structural, group and individual perspectives. It is a qualitative study, and the theoretical perspectives it employs are cultural reproduction theory, symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1974; Mead, 1976), frame-factor theories (Lundgren, 1977) and concepts from research on

"teacher thinking": *principles*, *images* and *strategies* (Clandinin, 1986; Elbaz, 1983; Woods, 1983).

Data

The main empirical study contains observations of circle time in five groups in different day-care centres and interviews with staff and children. The methods of data-collection were observation through video-taping and so called stimulated-recall interviews. The main data-collection phase was carried out during a three-week period in every group. Follow-up interviews with the teachers were conducted at least three times per group during a three-year period after the main data-collection phase.

The five groups studied were selected by means of strategic sampling. The groups had, in brief, the following characteristics:

1 A one-section, parental-cooperative day-care centre. The daily morning circle in an age-integrated group (1.5 - 5 years) of 14 children and three pre-school teachers was studied. At least one parent took part in the circles.

2 Quite a large municipal day-care centre in which a group of 16 children, most of them between 3 and 6.6 years of age, and two pre-school teachers and two child-care attendants were in focus. Their daily circle time at lunchtime was studied.

3 A two-section municipal day-care centre in which a group of 12 children aged 1 - 7, two pre-school teachers and one child-care attendant were in focus. Their daily circle time in the morning was studied.

4 The two-days-a-week circle time in a group of 5-year-olds in a municipal day-care centre was studied. The group consisted of 7 children and two pre-school teachers.

5 The three-days-a-week circle time of 15 six-year olds (10 girls and 5 boys) led by one pre-school teacher was studied.

Analysis

The analysis of data followed an eclectic approach which was empirically orientated to begin with. The coding of interviews and observations was performed in rounds, special events being noted and coded. A main category or key concept that emerged in the empirical data might be termed "maintaining the flow of activity" or "maintaining the group´s momentum".

The theoretical framework was in existence throughout the analysis, but it was only in the final phase that it was more consistently adapted. The different theories and theoretical concepts were used as searchlights which were lit one by one, supposedly illuminating the data from different angles and in different combinations, and proceeding from the intention that informative patterns would emerge.

Results

Circle time — a ritual and a meeting

Circle time can be viewed as a ritual, an everyday routine that creates security and a sense of community but also as a disciplining ritual of order. Subevents/segments like "seeing who is absent", song and music contribute to this sense of community and group cohesion. At a day-care centre, pre-school staff and children arrive at different times, which is a further reason why there may be a need for points of reference during the day - a way of being in control, reducing the fear of chaos but also creating security for children and staff alike.

Circle time is a social event, too a meeting where interaction between people takes place. It is also important to create a good atmosphere at this meeting, everybody is to have a good time (fun together, being able to joke and jest with each other)

The purpose of circle time with regard to the staff

For the pre-school staff involved circle time was interpreted as having three chief functions. First, it provides structure and order in the working day and a break during the weekday. It promotes a sense of structure and continuity. Second, it can be said to legitimize the professional role in the sense that it is very clearly shown what you do when you conduct a circle, in contrast to the more invisible pedagogy which characterizes considerable parts of the caring and apparently supervisory tasks of the pre-school institution. Third, circle time entails being allowed to take part in a meeting with others, which results in a feeling of togetherness as well as in an opportunity to appear before others and be acknowledged by them.

According to the teachers themselves, there are three main reasons for the existence of circle time:

- social training
- producing a feeling of togetherness, "we-ness"
- providing a good daily rhythm

Attitudes and ideas about circle time remained rather stable over the three years of follow-ups, except in one respect. The teachers in general express a more tolerant and liberal attitude towards the children's initiatives, and they experience themselves as less dominant. The reason for this change can be referred both to a personal level - increased experience - and to a structural level, e g affected by the relevant kind of group.

The purpose of circle time where the children were concerned

It turned out to be rather difficult to interview the children relying on a stimulated-recall technique. Maybe they were too excited by watching themselves on video and did not tell as much as had been expected.

Answering the question as to what they learn during circle time, some children said they were taught to sit still and behave. On the whole, the children when talking about circle time stressed the form rather than the content. One interpretation of these answers is that the most dominating

part of circle time from the children's point of view is the demand that they restrain themselves and try to sit still.

There was a possibility for the children to oppose, protest against and refrain from wholly complying with the demands raised in connection with circle time. Common ways of protesting were:

- leaving the circle, sitting outside it
- demonstratively not participating in activities
- refraining from participation in more subtle ways
- verbally protesting against instructions and then obeying them anyway

The protests were most common in a parent-cooperative day care centre. One reason is the presence of parents at circle time, this might be expected to make the children behave more as they would in a home than in an institution.

To the children, participation in circles entails both restriction and opportunity. On a general level, the circles can be said to contribute to the development of personal identity, to increase self-awareness and to foster democratic values. The regularly recurrent circles with their similar form and content give the child a sense of continuity, security and a possibility to recognize herself/himself. In circle time, the sense of belonging to a group is clearly marked, at the same time, the child is at the centre of everybody's attention. "Seeing who is present" as well as the many singing and playing events are activities conducive to making participants pay attention to the individual in the group. Being seated individually on a spot on the floor while still forming part of a circle is also a way of emphasizing the limits of the self against the non-self. The child becomes aware of herself/himself through her/his relations to others.

But circle time is also a matter of children being disciplined to evince restraint and self-control. Regularity, repetition, planning, structure and order are ways of disciplining. This, and the ensuing activity can be viewed as a part of preparing a child for school, training her/him to adjust to the hidden curriculum of the school.

In the circles the children are also trained in the complicated rules of

social interaction, the grammar of social life. The observations showed that the social rules and demands which were put upon the children varied in the different sub-events that formed part of circle time. Furthermore, the rules were to a certain extent context-bound. To put up one´s hand in order to be allowed to speak could, for instance, be an ordered way of taking one´s turn in the circles of one group, but not in another.

Conducting circle time entails coping with dilemmas

An important category that emerged from the empirical data was that of the *dilemma*. The teacher faced a number of dilemmas that she had to cope with while conducting circle time.

Factors operating on a structural level, tradition and certain context factors all contribute to the way in which circle time is implemented, e g in terms of relations between matters to do with care, upbringing and educational policy - all of which, in their turn, influence the ways in which children and staff comprehend the circles and the manner in which they act. These "frame factors" have built-in discrepancies (as was mentioned before) and sometimes oppose one another. To the one who conducts the circle, these discrepancies materialize in a number of experienced dilemmas which must be dealt with in order to maintain the flow of activity.

The expressed dilemmas were categorized into three groups:

1 Allowing for the individual child´s need to gain attention versus training the child to adjust to the group.

2 Allowing for every child's right to an individual response versus facing the fact that there are a number of children with the same need.

3 Taking into consideration the child versus the plan; allowing for the motivation and wishes of the children versus performing the teacher's task to educate and thereby legitimize her professional role.

The teachers´ way of dealing with the dilemmas was defined as *strategies*.

The most common strategy when it came to coping with the dilemma of the need for individual attention versus the desirability of group adjustment was to have activities, games, songs and roll calls that gave the individual child an opportunity to be in the focus of everybody's attention. Another strategy was to employ alternating activities in the circle time, allowing movement, song or a game to feature regularly. To address one child and the whole group in turn was a strategy geared to handling the need of the individual child and several childrens´ needs.

The relationship between teachers during circle time was one focus of the study. On the one hand, the presence of more than one teacher would create order and stable routines helping to keep to the plan. On the other hand, the negative aspect of all this was the risk of keeping to the routines to such an extent that one does not realize that it becomes very boring for the children. One advantage of being alone with them that was stressed was the greater possibility of improvising.

One interesting result was named "The 'afterwards' feeling". The interviewed teachers seemed to experience watching their circle time afterwards on video differently compared to how it was experienced while taking part in it. A general tendency was to experience it as calmer, more passive, slower and less controlled than one thought it was. In some cases, the circle time was perceived as having been much better than was originally believed.

Conclusions

The chief question addressed in this study was: *What actually happens during circle time, and what are the implications for participants?*

The results indicate that circle time is both a ritual and meeting. To the staff, circle time corresponds to a need for structuring activities and indicating obvious changes during the day. Circle time also makes it manifest that something is being done, involving a legitimation and also an

opportunity to appear before others and be acknowledged. Circle time affords the staff a 'scaffolding' for their working day, a chance of gaining recognition and justification in their professional roles. To the children, circles can be an asset entailing affirmatory meetings, but also a restraint where discipline and coercion are prevalent. The person conducting circle time is hence facing a number of dilemmas which are resolved by resorting to different strategies.

The pedagogical implications of the results can be summarized as follows:

The adoption of a normative stance is unhelpful. Rather, one has to realize that events and developments which occur during circle time are complex phenomena. In each case, the out-come depends on different factors and there are limited options for the pre-school teacher when it comes to coping with the pinpointed dilemmas.

The best way of developing circle time would be to try to become aware of existing dilemmas and hidden frameworks, evaluating the implications of the strategies used. What are the effects for the group as a whole, or for an individual child? What alternative strategies are possible to adopt? An evaluation must also take into account the content of other curricular events during a pre-school day.

One implication, especially in respect of teacher training, would be that it is important for the social and communicative competence of the pre-school teacher to be developed. This aim could be achieved by way of using various self-observation techniques, such as taping circle times and analysing them afterwards.

The disciplining and coercive features associated with circle time seemed to increase when several goals were implemented simultaneously: teaching talking and adhering to a ritual at the same time. It might be

possible to reduce coercion and control by concentrating in ritual, communication and tuition one at a time. Another way for the pre-school teacher to minimize repression and discipline is to be alone with the children.

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